



Research Report Executive Summary - February 2024

Expanding Opportunities for Education & Employment for College Students in Prison

A Process Evaluation of New York State's College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative

Pavithra Nagarajan, Kristen Parsons, Julia Bowling, Jennifer Ferone, and Neal Palmer

Decades of research point to the benefits of college in prison, which include reduced recidivism and improved employment outcomes following release.¹ Even for those who have not yet been released, these programs foster a sense of community² and purpose³ that can also lead to safer prison environments.⁴ Many people enter prison undereducated due to systemic disinvestment in their schools over the past 50 years, particularly in racial minority neighborhoods.^{5, 6} Students in economically disadvantaged school districts are disproportionately likely to be BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color),^{7, 8} and are also have a significantly higher risk of suspension—which, in turn, increases their likelihood of being incarcerated later in life as an adult.¹⁰

About one in three incarcerated adults have less than a high school equivalence (HSE), earned prior to or during incarceration, compared to 14 percent of the general public.¹¹ Additionally, only 15 percent of incarcerated adults earn a postsecondary degree or certificate either prior to or during incarceration, compared to 45 percent of the general population.¹²

With this context in mind, research shows that incarcerated people are interested in educational programming: a 2014 survey of a nationally representative sample of incarcerated adults found that 70 percent reported interest in enrolling in an academic class or program.¹³ Moreover, at the time of their incarceration, most people had incomes low enough to qualify for financial aid. For Black and Latine individuals, who are overrepresented in the incarcerated population, postsecondary education offers a chance to close the opportunity gap.¹⁴ It also has effects on whether they return to incarceration: a 2013 meta-analysis done on correctional education's effects on recidivism and post-release employment outcomes for incarcerated adults found that people who participated in educational programs had 43 percent lower odds of recidivating when compared to those who did not participate;¹⁵ a more recent meta-analysis found correctional educational program participants were 48 percent less likely to recidivate.

Despite the benefits, past policies and practices have limited the availability of postsecondary educational programs in prisons. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 led to a 26-year ban that prohibited incarcerated people from receiving federal and state financial

aid to pursue a college education in correctional facilities.¹⁶ At the federal level, the legislation revoked federal financial aid (known as Pell Grants) for incarcerated students;¹⁷ many states, including New York,¹⁸ followed suit by making these students ineligible for equivalent state financial aid programs.¹⁹ Because so many college-in-prison programs relied on a combination of Pell Grants and state financial support (e.g., New York State Tuition Assistance Program, or TAP) prior to 1994, this dramatic reduction in funding led to an immediate drop in the number of state prison systems offering programs from 38 to 29 in one year.²⁰ Within New York, the total number of college-in-prison programs dropped from 25 to just four.²¹

Over the ensuing decades, college-in-prison programs relied almost exclusively on foundations and private funders to operate. In 2017, former Governor Andrew Cuomo, former Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr., the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), and the Institute for State & Local Governance at the City University of New York (CUNY ISLG) established the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP). A \$7.3 million investment, CIP aimed to address the funding void created by decades of federal and state policy by building a partnership to provide more individuals with the opportunity to achieve a quality education. CIP was funded through the Manhattan District Attorney's \$250 million Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII)²² through its Diversion and Reentry portfolio, which was designed to provide tailored support to individuals to reduce their future involvement in the criminal legal system, better connect them to the services they need, and increase their likelihood of success in the community. Through this investment, CUNY ISLG's research team was responsible for conducting a multiyear process evaluation of the Initiative that assessed the implementation of CIP.

CIP funded seven colleges and universities (hereafter, "Providers")²³ to deliver college instruction across 17 prisons²⁴ in New York from Fall 2017 through Spring 2022.²⁵

CIP had four principal aims:

1. Provide funding to local colleges and universities to enroll more students, offer more courses, and expand degree programs, including in facilities that previously did not offer college in prison;
2. Establish shared program/curricular standards, align common course requirements and offerings, and in so doing, enable the transfer of credits between funded programs and institutions;
3. Strengthen the reentry support infrastructure; and
4. Exchange best practices and provide technical assistance for college in prison statewide.

FINDINGS

CIP enhanced the college-in-prison landscape in New York and established a blueprint for implementing and scaling similar programs quickly and effectively. This report and the lessons learned from CIP come at an exciting time as the landscape for college in prison has shifted considerably: in summer 2023, the federal government reinstated Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students, and the New York State legislature followed by reinstating Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) funding for the same population. Renewed access to these funding streams can help scale existing college-in-prison programs and help to establish new ones. CIP, and this corresponding process evaluation report, can provide an instructive model for this impending expansion as corrections, education providers, and other stakeholders adapt to a new and promising era for prison education.

CUNY ISLG’s process evaluation sought to document the implementation of the CIP model over time, including: the goals the Initiative aimed to address, how programs were established and operated in corrections facilities, the challenges stakeholders experienced and how they navigated them, and the successes stakeholders experienced in achieving the aims of the Initiative. CIP also contended with the COVID-19 pandemic, with Providers, faculty, facility staff, and other stakeholders collaborating to devise creative solutions to continue programming in a time of uncertainty. The process evaluation provided an opportunity to understand the impact of these adaptations in a systematic way. Additionally, the evaluation assessed CIP’s efforts to implement statewide reforms related to curricular and instructor standards, transfer agreements, and reentry support, in order to inform college-in-prison efforts beyond this Initiative.

This report follows two policy briefs that highlighted key mid-evaluation findings from CIP. These briefs, *Goals & Achievements* and *Lessons Learned & Recommendations for Expansion*, were published in CUNY ISLG’s “The College-In-Prison Reentry Initiative: A Smart Investment for New York” series in February 2022. Whereas these policy briefs focused on early implementation of CIP through the Spring 2019 academic semester, this final process evaluation report highlights findings from the full implementation period of the Initiative over five academic years (i.e., from Fall 2017- Spring 2022).

The report begins by discussing the process evaluation’s goals and objectives, research design, and research questions that guided the data collection and analysis. From there, the report presents key quantitative and qualitative findings across three substantive areas that broadly align with the first three principal aims of CIP, including: 1. Expanding Access to College in Prison, 2. Ensuring Instructional Quality, Alignment and Transferability, and 3. Improving and Expanding

Reentry. The fourth aim regarding technical assistance, which was more procedural in practice, was integrated with the other three aims, and therefore is not a direct focus of this report.

Finally, the report concludes with a summary of recommendations for education providers, corrections staff, and other stakeholders interested in pursuing similar initiatives in New York as well as across the country. Overall, these findings indicate that the Initiative was successful in increasing access to higher education in New York State prisons, and the findings further raise several important insights with regard to system-wide coordination, curricula alignment, and provision of reentry resources.

Expanding Access to College in Prison

CIP substantially expanded access to college education for individuals in DOCCS facilities while addressing many of the systemic barriers students face in earning degrees and upon reentering the community. Over the course of the Initiative, seven Education Providers (including two college Providers who previously had not offered college in prison) expanded college programs into four new correctional facilities, providing college instruction in 17 total facilities across the state. CIP also expanded the number and types of degree programs available among the Providers in correctional facilities from 10 to 14, including four additional associate-level programs. Collectively, these enhancements enabled Providers to offer more diverse degree paths and courses in additional program facilities to serve more students, which increased opportunities for degree completion prior to release. Of the 86 students known to have completed their degrees during the implementation period, the majority (91 percent; n=78) did so by the date they were released, at rates similar across racial/ethnic groups. In all, the Initiative served 931 students, and in so doing, helped increase DOCCS total (combined CIP and non-CIP) college enrollment capacity by approximately 35 percent since 2016, from 1,106 students to 1,493 as of 2022.^{26, 27, 28}

Of the 931 CIP students, more than three-quarters (84 percent; n=780) newly enrolled in college during the Initiative. Students most commonly engaged in courses related to social science, literature, and writing mechanics. Although students appreciated the variety of class topics, they advocated for additional offerings, such as advanced mathematics or computer-based courses. Among all associate- and bachelor-level students, the average student had earned almost half (42 percent) of the total required credits for their degree paths while enrolled in their respective programs.²⁹ Looking specifically at released associate of art (AA)/associate of science (AS) and bachelor of art (BA)/bachelor of sciences (BS) students who had not yet completed their degrees, they had satisfied nearly half (45 percent) of their degree requirements on average by the time of their release. Aside from release, common reasons students exited their programs included facility transfers, voluntary dropouts, and disciplinary reasons.

Ensuring Instructional Quality, Alignment, and Transferability

Overall, students, Providers, and faculty found the curriculum and academic standards in their CIP programs to be comparable to traditional programs in the community. Nearly all faculty noted the high quality of students' work along with students' drive to perform well, including higher levels of engagement compared to students on campus. CIP students also performed at high rates: average student GPAs consistently reached 3.0 or greater in any semester, with the exception of those that were principally disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., Spring and Summer 2020) as programs pivoted to remote instruction. Several Providers and faculty, however, noted that students' overall preparedness for college could be stronger, particularly with regard to writing skills, and that additional supports (e.g., tutoring, remedial coursework) would have better prepared students for college-level instruction.

As part of the Initiative, the State University of New York (SUNY) Higher Education for the Justice-Involved worked to align program standards as well as transfer and articulation agreements among five of the seven Providers to facilitate the transfer of comparable credits between academic institutions—in order to help students stay on track with degree progress even if they transfer correctional facilities or attend school in the community after release. Several challenges remain in facilitating degree progress, however; for example, Providers often struggled to obtain students' former transcripts, which at times resulted in a student having to repeat a course they had already completed.

Improving and Expanding Reentry

Incarcerated students experience significant barriers to employment, education, and other basic needs after their release. For example, reentry resources are not equitably distributed across the state; many Providers and students noted these resources are concentrated in downstate regions like New York City and less so upstate. Although DOCCS staff typically provided reentry planning and resources, Providers were well positioned to offer more tailored support, particularly with regard to re-enrollment in college. Institute for Justice and Opportunity at John Jay College of Criminal Justice worked with Providers to incorporate reentry resource tools, including a series of workshops, written guides, and individually tailored academic reentry plans. Reenrollment post-release, however, remains low among those who are released without degrees; Providers reported that only 10 percent of these students had returned to college within six months of leaving prison.³⁰ That said, it is worth considering that students have several practical needs that need to be met when returning home, such as food security, employment, and safe housing, which take precedence over reenrollment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since its creation in 2017, CIP encountered a number of critical challenges and learning opportunities around starting and expanding college-in-prison programs across New York. As institutions across the state, and the country, prepare to establish or expand existing programs with reinstated Pell funding, there is a need for more guidance in the field at large on how to best navigate the myriad challenges of doing so. The recommendations included in this report draw from CUNY ISLG's process evaluation of CIP and can help education providers, corrections staff, and other stakeholders consider how best to prepare for and carry out their missions to provide high-quality postsecondary education to students who are incarcerated. These recommendations are grouped into five substantive areas and address the following topics:

Coordination and Collaboration between Stakeholders

- Establish buy-in among facility staff for college-in-prison programs.
- Align application and enrollment processes across providers as much as possible.
- Ensure alignment between corrections agencies and providers around student eligibility requirements, planned transfer, and releases.
- Establish clear data-sharing and security protocols early on to ensure the ethical use and exchange of student information.
- Allocate sufficient staffing resources to track performance and adapt programming as necessary.
- Participate in networked communities in order to create a shared knowledge base about the administration and instruction of college-in-prison programs.
- Align course offerings and standards across postsecondary educational programs offered in a given region or among participating providers in a common initiative.

Academic Resources and Supports

- Update and expand access to library and college-level reading materials in facility classrooms and student spaces.
- Ensure that physical spaces and resources are conducive to learning.
- Increase availability of remedial coursework to support academic preparedness among students.
- Incorporate early and ongoing supports and interventions for writing needs.

Instruction and Pedagogy

- Recruit faculty prepared for the realities of teaching in carceral settings.
- Offer training on and promote inclusion of trauma-informed pedagogy for faculty.
- Replicate the faculty-student relationships of on-campus learning as much as possible.
- Engage in in-person instruction as the primary mode of course delivery.
- Consider remote instruction specifically to expand access to coursework (when in-person instruction is not feasible), materials and enrichment.

Academic Reentry

- Provide students with copies of transcripts and other relevant documents at regular intervals.
- Coordinate with postsecondary institutions to support re-enrollment after release.
- Regularly conduct labor market research to determine which fields of study could best prepare students for projected job openings.
- Foster connections among college-in-prison alumni, and among alumni and relevant mentors.
- Provide opportunities for faculty to maintain some form of regulated contact with students after release to mirror the mentoring and support that traditional students receive in the community.

Practical Reentry

- Coordinate and systematize educational reentry policies and practices between providers, corrections, and other stakeholders as appropriate.
- Develop streamlined communication protocols and processes between providers, corrections, and other stakeholders regarding reentry planning.
- Offer support for job-searching and securing employment.
- Increase funding for reentry resources to expand their availability and depth.
- Incorporate supports for acclimating students to the Internet and developing comfort with technology.
- Develop and codify a set of best practices to support successful reentry.

CONCLUSION

CIP demonstrated the value—both at the individual and systems level—of shifting the criminal legal system beyond punishment and more firmly toward rehabilitation. The Initiative invested in students and their potential to increase their likelihood of success upon reentry in the community and avoid future involvement in the criminal legal system. During the five full academic years of CIP (Fall 2017 through Spring 2022), the Initiative substantially expanded access to postsecondary programs across New York. CIP increased the number of available programs, courses, and degree paths for incarcerated individuals who have traditionally been excluded from higher education, including BIPOC individuals and those from historically under-resourced areas. As a result, CIP expanded access to supports, opportunities, and fulfillment in ways that will pay dividends for years to come—both for the communities where students reenter after incarceration, and for students themselves as they continue their education, gain employment, and readjust to life after release.

As of Spring 2022, and due to funding from Second Chance Pell, CIP, private foundations, and individual donors, 31 degree/certificate programs operate across 30 of the 44 New York State prisons.³¹ The Initiative also created the necessary infrastructure—through curriculum mapping, alignment, and articulation and transfer agreements—to better facilitate the continuation of coursework so that more students (both CIP and non-CIP students) were better positioned to successfully complete their degrees in cases of facility transfer

or after they are released. CIP also led to more robust reentry supports through the creation of tools and resources to help colleges provide incarcerated students with individualized academic reentry plans that support the continuation of academic programs upon release.

However, despite renewed investments and interest in postsecondary education in prison, New York's college-in-prison landscape remains smaller than before federal and state financial aid was first eliminated decades ago. With momentum behind the recent reinstatement of the TAP³² for incarcerated individuals and the reinstatement of Pell Grants, along with the support of committed providers and college in prison advocates, the state has the opportunity to provide high quality, postsecondary education across the entire DOCCS system in a more coordinated, comprehensive way. In particular, this expansion can support initiating new programming in Northern and Western New York where most DOCCS facilities are located and there is unmet demand. Reentry providers will need to expand their supports accordingly in these areas as well. Indeed, prison education is experiencing a watershed moment and may soon be able to deliver on the promise of making high quality, postsecondary education accessible for the first time in many of these students' lives, rectifying a decades-long disparity in educational access while contributing to more successful reentry and safer communities for all New Yorkers and beyond.



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The Manhattan District Attorney's Office (DANY) has invested funds through its Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) to support impactful projects that improve public safety and promote a fair and efficient justice system in New York City. Between 2018 and 2022, DANY has provided \$7.3 million under CJII to fund the College-in-Prison Reentry Initiative (CIP).

CUNY ISLG is the technical assistance consultant to the Manhattan District Attorney's Office for CJII, providing oversight and performance measurement to CIP and other CJII grantees, and also oversees this evaluation on behalf of DANY

Endnotes

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23. These seven Providers are Bard College, Cornell University, Medaille College, Mercy College, Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC), New York University (NYU), and SUNY Jefferson. As of May 2022 Medaille College was renamed “Medaille University”. Likewise, in August 2023, Mercy College was renamed “Mercy University.” This report uses “Medaille College” and “Mercy College” throughout to refer to these institutions, as these name changes followed the conclusion of CIP.
24. Watertown Correctional Facility was closed in March 2021. CIP programming continues at the remaining 16 facilities.
25. Although not included in this report, some Providers continued to deliver college in prison past the Spring 2022 semester using CJII funding.
26. Enrollment capacity fluctuated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related pauses in college in prison. In 2019, enrollment was at 1,513 students but dropped precipitously in 2020 to 1,233 students due to the pandemic. At 1,493 students in 2022, enrollment has nearly matched its highest levels, pre-pandemic, during CIP.
27. Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. (n.d.). College Programs. <https://doccs.ny.gov/college-programs>; At the time of reporting, eight of the 52 DOCCS facilities that were open in Fall 2017 have since closed.
28. It is infeasible to offer college programming in some of these facilities due to the short-term incarceration period of the individuals within them.
29. Calculations for average degree progress exclude those students in certificate or specialization programs such as the Public Health specialization. Students typically earn more credits than is re-quired for these programs before enrolling in an associate’s or bachelor’s degree program. Analyses for average degree progress therefore include all AA/AS and BA/BS students (N=882), as of the Spring 2022 semester.
30. This is a conservative estimate due to missing data from Providers on former CIP students who have since been released.
31. As mentioned elsewhere, the reduction in facilities reflects closures across New York State. Please refer to *Figure 1* in the full report.
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